

Beautiful Bountiful Berries
By: Floyd Wright
Published in *Estes Park News*, April 28, 2017, page 30.
Posted at evcg.org with permission.

There are a lot of fruits, grains, and vegetables that thrive here in Estes Park. Many of them, however, are more obscure crops rather than mainstays like corn or tomatoes, which do not flourish in our cooler climate.

My favorite category of crops grows especially well here, yet is overlooked by many people. We'll call this category small fruits.

There are three small fruits that are quite at home here. These are currants, gooseberries, and wild strawberries. Each of these has wild relatives growing in the surrounding hills, and that is a good sign of their stamina and resilience.

There are three different fruit colors in the currant family, and many named varieties of each. These colors are black, red, and white. Black currants are quite popular abroad. Russia, Poland, and Germany are the three largest producers. Black currants make delicious juice, jelly, liquors, and wine.

White currants are my favorite because of their pleasant flavor and culinary uses, and for their unique appearance—you can see the seeds through their translucent flesh.

Mention gooseberries, and many people imagine thorny plants with small, tart, green berries. Thorns do exist on most varieties, but there is great variation in the fruit, ranging from tart to dessert quality. Local wild gooseberries are the size of a little fingernail, while some cultivated varieties are the diameter of quarter. Green fruit doesn't equate with sour—some of the best dessert varieties are green.

One explanation for the origin of the name gooseberry is that the berries make a nice sauce poured over cooked goose.

Wild strawberries are always a treat to run across while out on a hike, and they are easy to grow at home as well. They produce all summer long, and kids of all ages delight in them. Wild strawberries are a different species from store-bought strawberries, and have a little different flavor.

There are many excellent selections of wild strawberry. A few popular names include 'Alexandria,' 'Mignonette,' 'White Soul,' and 'Yellow Wonder.' Some of these can be found as plants in seed and nursery catalogs, but they grow well from seed also.

We in America rarely see wild strawberries mentioned as anything other than a ground cover. In Europe, however, *fraise de bois*, or wood strawberries, are a centuries old gourmet tradition that can still be found in high end hotels and on fine pastries. They sell for \$10 - \$20 per pound in Europe.

Wild strawberries are perennial in the garden here though they may have some die back in dry winters. Grown from seed, fruit occurs about 120 days after sowing. Sown indoors in spring, they will fruit by mid-summer outdoors. Once they begin fruiting, they fruit continuously until hard freeze.

While wild strawberries do create a lovely ground cover when planted thick, they produce only few and tiny berries. If you grow them like a garden crop instead, and give them at least one square foot per plant, they will produce many large berries, some the size of a dime or even a nickel. Wild strawberries also adapt well to a porch pot.

Robins and other birds can occasionally be a problem with small fruits. Bird netting supported with hoops is an effective solution. White and yellow varieties are not eaten by birds much, possibly because they don't think they are ripe.

These fruits can all be enjoyed fresh, blended into smoothies, dried into fruit leathers, topped on salads, or made into a variety of preserves and sauces, including meat sauces. So, be bold and expand your gardening repertoire, and enjoy the delight of fresh berries!